

**Jouni Kitti:**

## **WILD SALMON STOCKS IN THE SAAMI REGION**

For centuries, the salmon has been of vast importance to the Saami economy. Salmon migrating to spawn along the Norwegian coast have been easy to catch. The Saami's ancient home areas have frequently been situated along the salmon's migratory routes and close to salmon rivers. In the areas occupied by the Saami and in which the salmon continue migrating and ascending the rivers, catching them is still of the utmost importance to the survival of the Saami settlements.

Salmon spawn in fresh, running water, while their feeding and growing areas are in the sea. The southern limit of the wild stocks of Atlantic salmon lies at around 35 degrees North. At such latitudes lie the southernmost breeding rivers of the salmon on both sides of the Atlantic. On the European side there are salmon rivers right along the coast, the easternmost one being located in the Petsora area, in western Siberia. On the North American coast there are salmon rivers in the north right up as far as the Ungava Peninsula.

Over a long period of time the salmon populations have diverged genetically. Studies have revealed that the populations in different rivers differ from each other, the deviation becoming greater with increased distance between the rivers, or due to some other obstacle preventing interbreeding. For example, in the River Tenojoki differences are also detectable among the wild salmon sub-populations breeding in different tributaries and current conditions along the same river. Gene flow takes place from one sub-population to another and between populations in different rivers which again dilutes differentiation. Genetic differences are also apparent in the salmon's migratory routes, in the marine feeding areas, in the migration times, growth rates, and so on.

Today we are concerned about the Atlantic salmon, which is of paramount importance to the indigenous peoples of the northern hemisphere; the Atlantic salmon is irreplaceable. The salmon stocks of the Tenojoki and Näätamöjoki rivers are vital to the Saami and the preservation of these rivers as suitable fishing habitats from the standpoint of the Saami culture is a matter of the utmost importance. The Saami have participated in the drafting of the latest agreements concerning the regulation of fishing in the Tenojoki and the Saami Parliament has also been incorporated in the North Atlantic salmon protection organisation, NASCO, as an observer member. The first agreement between Finland and Norway in regard to fishing in the Tenojoki was drawn up in 1873, while the latest one came into force at the beginning of 1990.

After the Second World War, and more particularly during the 1970s, rapid improvements took place in the efficiency of fishing, both in rivers and in the sea. Fishing in the marine feeding areas far from the salmon's spawning grounds affects growing fish and the catch from the sea naturally reduces the number of fish returning to the rivers. Salmon fishing regulation realised as international cooperation at the instigation of NASCO is aimed at reducing salmon catching in the sea and ensuring a sufficiency of salmon ascending the rivers, which in turn will help to preserve the river Saami culture.

Located in the centre of the Saami region, the Tenojoki and Näätämöjoki are salmon rivers supporting wild salmon populations. In both these rivers, diversity among the sub-populations and wild fry production have been retained. Fishing affecting the salmon populations of these rivers, their estuaries and the sea has not increased to critical proportions in the two rivers, because the various restrictions on fishing have been moderately successful in regard to their extent and timing. The success of the regulation of fishing is reflected in the fact that in the main parts of the Tenojoki watercourse in the area where the salmon go upstream, fry production is still relatively good.

Young salmon descend the Tenojoki and Näätämöjoki to the sea after 4-5 years in the river. They set out from Teno fjord, following the coast westwards. The majority of migrating young fish head for the sea area to the north of the Faroes and an appreciable proportion of them migrates to the feeding areas on the eastern side of Greenland. After three years in the sea, the salmon return from Greenland waters to the Tenojoki. The return journey from Faroe waters generally takes place after two years in the sea, while the small salmon have spent only one year in the marine environment.

Over the past twenty years the salmon catches in the Tenojoki have fluctuated tremendously, which cannot, of course, be considered abnormal in the extreme arctic environment. At best they have amounted to over 250 tons, and at worst to only 75 tons. In the 1990s the annual Tenojoki catches have hovered around the 150 ton level. The salmon catch from the Finnish side of the river has accounted for around 40 % of the total catch. The Finnish salmon catch in the Näätämöjoki each year has been about 2-3 tons, with the total catch coming to just over 10 tons. In both rivers salmon are caught using a rod and line and traditional gear. Saami living along the river banks employ both methods, but for people coming on fishing trips from elsewhere only rod fishing is permitted. The catch on rod and line appears to account for a significant part of the Tenojoki catch these days. From the economic perspective, the relative share of rod and line fishing in salmon fishing as a whole and its impact on the Saami river bank population is much greater than the actual proportion of the catch.

To safeguard the Tenojoki salmon population as a wild, reproducing one, together with the requirements of river fishing, restrictions on the fishing have been necessary in the sea, in the river estuary, and along the river itself. Through the research called for by the Tenojoki agreement, fluctuations and changes in both the salmon catches and fry production can be monitored. If necessary, it must be possible to react to the results by revising either the agreement or the fishing regulations. The same goes for other threats which must be eliminated, like salmon diseases, wastewater discharges along the Tenojoki, etc, affecting the salmon population. Although construction projects on the Tenojoki waterway seem to be a thing of the past, new threats, like an increase in wastewater discharges, mining activities, the spread of non-endemics, the threat of fish diseases and parasites caused by increasing fish farming, have appeared. The spread of the destructive salmon parasite *Gyrodactylus salaris* into the northernmost salmon river in the Saami region is a threat the eradication of which calls for both international and national cooperation. The Saami Parliament wishes to draw attention in this connection to the part of the Rio agreement on biodiversity on the basis of which it was proposed that by 1994 the farming of salmon should be prohibited in the fjord of the Tenojoki to prevent dangerous fish diseases spreading up the Tenojoki, and to stop salmon escapees from cages diluting the Tenojoki salmon gene pool. We Saami wish to participate in this work, aimed as it is at preserving the wild salmon.

The Saami indigenous people and ethnic minority have a constitutional right to the salmon fishing that forms part of their culture in accordance with international regulations. Since 1978 the Finnish Parliament's constitution committee has considered that fishing is a form of livelihood which specially belongs to the kind of culture associated with the Saami people. Salmon fishing practised as a means of livelihood in its various forms is, in accordance with article 27 of the UN's general agreement, part of the Saami minority culture. The UN's human rights committee, which in the long run decides on complaints connected with contraventions to this agreement, in 1994 issued a statement respecting the interpretation of article 27. According to paragraph 7 of the general comments, minority and indigenous groups have a right to the protection of such activities as fishing. In the implementation of these rights we must ensure the adequate participation of people belonging to these minority groups in the decision making that affects them.

The Saami are an indigenous people inhabiting an extensive area who have the right to maintain and develop their own language and form of culture to which, among other things, salmon fishing traditionally belongs. In addition, the Saami as an indigenous people in the Saami area should have the right to self-determination in respect of their language and culture. These rights have

been strengthened by the amendment to Finland's Constitution approved by Parliament in 1995.

The Tenjoki salmon populations represent a renewable natural resource the use of which creates a foundation for the form of livelihood practised by the Saami. This is also possible in keeping with the principle of sustainable use, enabling the salmon populations, general biodiversity, and river Saami culture to remain unharmed.

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